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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the communicative approach in the second language classroom reasserts its value while highlighting some of the difficulties in implementing the approach: time constraints; difficulty in providing motivation for communication in the more formal language registers; potential imbalance in emphasis on oral and written communication skills; and finding a communication-enhancing method for correcting errors, among others. Use of films in the classroom is proposed as a means of overcoming these difficulties. Film can be used simply to provide an opportunity for developing listening skills and as a stimulus for discussion or, linked with a source literary text, it can be used very effectively to motivate students to communicate using all language skills. The latter technique involves having students work together to create a visual version of a text, in screen play form, which is then compared with that of the screenwriters of the existing movie version. The film "Kaos" is used to illustrate the method. Various techniques for dealing with accuracy in communication are explored. (Author/MSE)

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CINEMA IN THE CLASSROOM:
Creating a Climate for Meaningful Communication

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ED 404 867

This paper is not a defence for the sole use of the communicative approach to second language learning in the classroom.[1] However, whatever pedagogical methodology is used initially, if at a certain point the goal of both oral and written communication in the target language is not reached, then clearly something is amiss. It is equally clear that such communication cannot be expected to somehow appear magically "later on", or at the "end of the course", or at some unspecified future time. It must develop gradually and be an integral part of classroom activity or it will not "appear" at all.

A host of books[2] already on the library shelves suggest an almost endless variety of classroom strategies for motivating both oral and written communication in the less formal registers, but in the later years of secondary school and certainly at the university level, one must also approach a more formal register and it is frequently assumed that at this level both motivation and communication will somehow take care of themselves. In

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[1] Savignon, Sandra J., Communicative Competence: Theory and Classroom Practice, Addison-Wesley Publishing, Reading, Mass.: 1983.

[2] See for example, Marcel Danesi's three books: Puzzles and Games in Language Teaching, National Textbook, Lincolnwood, Ill.: 1985, A Guide to Puzzles and Games in Second Language Pedagogy, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education Press, Toronto, Ont.: 1985, or Language Games in Italian, University of Toronto Press, Toronto & Buffalo: 1985, or Julie Docker, Parliamo insieme: Communication Activities in Italian, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1994, or even the course by Denise de Rome et. al., Italianissimo: a multi-media course for learning Italian, BBC Books, London: 1992

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addition, course objectives together with time constraints mitigate against a communicative approach to language learning and while more and more texts and multimedia packages are appearing every day which, either on their own or together with some creative additions by the instructor, can go a long way toward answering the time constraint objections[3], the issue of motivation and the difficulty of creating a climate for real communication in a more formal register in the upper-intermediate and the advanced level language classroom still remains problematic.

Of course, as we have always done, we can still make good use of written texts. Information, explanation or interpretation can be requested of students either orally or in writing concerning the themes, the characters, the literary techniques adopted by the author, the plot itself or the meaning of individual words or expressions. The basic strategies used to ensure comprehension at the most basic level can be categorised according to who initiates the exchange of information: the instructor, the class or the individual student. Here, provided one does not fall into the "translation trap", no methodological revolution is needed in order to maximise the use of Italian.

In this regard, I would like to digress for a moment and make what for some will be considered an outrageous suggestion. Some instructors, faithful to the principle of always maximising the use of the target language-- a principle for which over some

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[3]However, the only authentically and solely communicative approach textbook which this author has come across is the above cited work: Italianissimo: a multi-media course for learning Italian.

forty years, if not longer, all good language teachers have fought--in order to avoid the translation trap, have forbidden the use of any translation at all, be it by the instructor, the student or by a professional translator. Why don't we, as one-time second language learners, remember that horrible and frustrating sensation which we too once experienced, that feeling of reading a text as if through a veil which is only partially transparent? Of course it goes against all second language teaching principles to translate everything, but why not permit students to read once and for all a clear and good translation of the work in question and then, having satisfied or rather eliminated that unbearable frustration, the student will then be able to confront the original with no further references to that betrayal which translation, to one extent or another, must be. This way we can avoid the temptation, or should I say, the trap of insisting upon the use of translation in order to assure us of students' comprehension. In the end, of course, it is a question of everything in moderation.

Back to the above-mentioned three techniques for eliciting information, explanation or interpretation in regard to themes, literary techniques, characters, plot or vocabulary-- in the first, after an initial reading by everyone of the complete text, the instructor or a student reads a passage aloud, after which the teacher comments on it. This is the classical *explication de texte* which, of course, is always done completely in the target language. Difficult words or expressions are explained, again making use of the target language, and the instructor indicates which ones the students would do well to learn as active vocabulary and which it would be sufficient to commit to passive

memory. In the end, as usual, the instructor assesses students' comprehension of the text and their capacity to interpret it by means of written or oral tests, with the usual assignments to be done either in class or at home, with oral presentations or whatever, but always insisting upon the use of Italian as the means of communication.

The second strategy is similar to the first, but the entire class must prepare themselves to explain the text. After a reading of the passage under study, individual students are called upon to do an *explication de texte* as above. Using the third strategy, and again after a first reading of the text at home by everyone, individual students are assigned particular passages to explain and comment upon. Questions by the other students are to be answered by the student responsible for the passage. Obviously, good teachers will alternate and vary these strategies in order to avoid boredom.

Interpretation at a deeper level-- the recognition of themes, symbols, literary techniques-- will be presented, argued and discussed in Italian as well. All of the methods already in use: essays to be written at home or in class under exam conditions, oral presentations, the so-called "card-system" for organising all information and ideas concerning the themes, characters, etc.-- all of these methods can be adopted as usual, but always in Italian.

One must forever keep in mind that it is always better to explain than to translate. Both discussion and written essays are always to be done in Italian. It will be necessary to explain, it will be necessary to repeat the explanation perhaps more than

once or using simpler terms, it will be necessary to have a great deal of patience and a great deal of creativity, but in the end, the students will learn that Italian can be, in fact, their means of communication.

I, like most of you, have used these techniques or others similar for many years, but often, while the opportunity for real communication is certainly there, motivating students to grasp that opportunity still remains problematic. Many of today's students, born in the television age, understand the language of the visual image better than that of the written text and it is often difficult to discover material which will engage the by now visually-oriented students' full attention and be the starting point for real, meaningful oral and written communication. What I would like to propose in this paper today, are three ways of engaging that attention by making use of the language of cinema, that is, the visual image, either on its own or in conjunction with the written text to motivate students and create a climate for meaningful communication. There are several advantages to this approach. The first, already mentioned, is students' familarity with the medium and their easy understanding of the language of the visual image. The second, and this pertains primarily to students in the earlier stages of language learning, is that the film can be chosen for its easily understood, though totally authentic, spoken language. The third is that most films will make use of a variety of linguistic registers thus illustrating in a very natural way, the differing levels of formality which make up the living language. Another advantage is that a film is often more manageable for students in terms of length than, say, a

classical novel. But the most important advantage is that film often has the capacity to engender discussion and communication like no other medium.[4]

The first technique which I would like to suggest is that of the silent image. Here, the instructor makes use of a scene from a film, certain television advertisements, or even one of those rare films which have no spoken dialogue.[5] First the scene is shown with no sound and where necessary a preliminary direct association vocabulary expansion exercise, all in the target language, can be done. Alternatively, necessary vocabulary can be presented in other ways, previous to the showing of the film. Or, of course, the scene can be selected precisely because the needed structures and vocabulary have already been mastered. The scene chosen should be in some way ambiguous or at least not obvious, so that individual interpretation is necessary in order to come to some conclusion as to what is actually going on or what the motivation is which explains the characters' actions. The scene is shown once or twice so students can begin to make preliminary hypotheses. Students are invited to share these with the class, explaining their line of reasoning, and then the excerpt is shown again so that these hypotheses can be tested. By this point, there is usually quite heated debate as to why one student's interpretation is wrong and another is right. Students feel the

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[4]See M. Strong Cincotta, "*Káos*, Pirandello and the communicative approach to language learning: an example of the use of literature and cinema in the language classroom", Babel: Journal of the Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers' Association , Vol. 26, Number 2, October 1991, p.35-37.

[5]Here I must thank for some of these ideas the team from the Johns Hopkins University centre at Bologna who kindly gave me permission to make use here of those ideas on the occasion of their extremely interesting in-service course for teachers of Italian held last year at the University of Sydney.

need to either defend their own point of view or criticise another's and the discussion can become quite lively. When no further progress can be made towards validating or disproving students' hypothese, the scene is projected with the sound. Students' dawning understanding of what really took place usually produces either the satisfaction of knowing that they were correct in their interpretation or great amusement when it turns out that everyone had misinterpreted the images. Those television advertisements which enact a little story which ends, for example, in embarassment for one of the characters, can be very useful. The well-known 1983 film by Ettore Scola Ballando Ballando, which recounts in visual images alone a history of dancing and social mores is a wonderful film for this, because it takes a while to realise precisely what the film is attempting to portray. The same characters appear in each historical setting but with a different appearance and different mannerisms, and the lack of dialogue absolutely begs for each scene to be explained. There is great scope for individual description, analysis and interpretation. And almost any film will contain scenes which, without the explanatory dialogue, are open to varying interpretations.

The second strategy which I would like to propose for the use of cinema in the classroom is related to the first in that it too deals with the visual image, but rather than beginning with the visual image in order to arrive at an interpretation, it looks at all of the devices which the film maker uses-- and primary among these, of course, is indeed the visual image-- in order to communicate her message. Here I would like to quote Prof. Sergio

Micheli (of the Centre for Cinema and Mass Media Studies of the University of Siena) in his latest book Il film: struttura, lingua, stile who in turn quotes Gherardo Gherardi who said in 1936:

> Il dialogo nel cinema non ha niente da fare (...) Che cosa resta, dunque, al cinematografo? Unicamente e soltanto delle parole necessarie. Per necessarie in cinematografo intendo quelle parole che anzichè arrestare l'azione, la fanno precipitare. Le parole del cinematografo sono essenziali. Perdono perfino il loro posto nel vocabolario tanto poco sono *le parole*. Sono scatti, moti, gridi, percosse, scherni. Insomma movimenti. Un bel film è quello in cui i personaggi parlano poco e fanno molto i fatti. E' in questa *attività* la modernità del cinematografo(...) Per concludere, discende da quanto ho detto, un paradosso: quando un film ha bisogno di un bel dialogo, vuol dire che è brutto. Perchè se è bello, il dialogo è tutto nei dibattiti delle inquadrature e dei ritmi visivi. E allora le parole nascono da sè, dall'anima stessa dell'azione: semplici, significative, essenziali.[6]

Prof. Micheli explains:

> La tradizione della letteratura narrative, assunta e ormai sperimentata dal cinema in funzione delle specifiche esigenze del mezzo espressivo, determina un prodotto filmico *leggibile* con nessi logici omologhi al romanzo. Non vi è dubbio che nella sostanza di questo modo tradizionale di raccontare una storia vi sia intanto lo sforzo da parte

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[6]Sergio Micheli, Il film: struttura, lingua, stile, Mario Bulzoni Editore, Roma: 1991, p.91.

> dello scrittore di riuscire a *far vedere*, vale a dire a rendere il più possibile, attraverso una minuziosa e puntuale descrizione, ambienti, personaggi, cose.[7]

The writer struggles to make visible settings, characters, things. The task of the film-maker in this regard is easier. But while the writer may fill pages and pages with words which describe the feelings, the mood, the attitude of a character, it is primarily through visual images: colour, movement, camera angle-- that the film-maker can render apparent these interior states. Young people today can read this visual language easily and naturally and they find it compelling, and perhaps that is why they feel a strong need to analyse how it functions. So the second communicative strategy which is particularly suited to film is the analysis of the language of cinema, that is to say, the visual image. Here we are in fact approaching the immersion technique of teaching language through the teaching of something other than language, but it has the added advantage of engaging the students in meaningful, stimulating and necessarily active communication because their opinions, insights and interpretation are the basis of this technique.

The third, and perhaps most innovative as well as successful technique for the use of cinema in the classroom links film and literature. In order to make use of it, it is necessary, obviously, that the film chosen have an original literary text from which it has been adapted. An example of a film which is perfectly suitable to this treatment--and it is only one of very, very many of such films-- is the Taviani brothers' film Káos

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[7]Ibid., p. 33.

which has been loosely based--as the credits inform us-- on the short stories of Luigi Pirandello. Obviously, this film has the added advantage of introducing students to a contemporary Italian author of world renown. Here I quote the analysis of this film done by Sergio Micheli in his book Pirandello in cinema:

> Gli episodi di cui si compone Káos sono cinque, sebbene vi sia un riferimento diretto alle novelle di Pirandello solo per i primi quattro e cioè *L'altro figno, Mal di luna, ...Requiem aeterna* e *La giara*... Il film...si avvale così di altri spunti, estratti sempre dalla stessa raccolta. Infatti, mentre il prologo tiene presente la novella *Il corvo di Mizzaro,* la parte finale, che i Taviani intitolano *Colloquio con la madre,* riecheggia *Colloquii coi personaggi* (oltre a *Tragedia di un personaggio).*
>
> L'apertura e la chiusura del film sembrano perciò costituire le parti se si vuole, più originali, ovvero più *liberamente* ispirate all'opera narrativa pirandelliana: quelle parti che, come un'appropriata ed armonica cornice racchiudono in quanto elementi leganti, l'assieme centrale interpretato ed elaborato sulla base di un Piraandello più letterale.[8]

A first topic for discussion in class therefore could be the matter of this "loosely based" or "freely adapted". What does that mean exactly? How much of the short stories is found in the film and where?

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[8]Sergio Micheli, Pirandello in cinema, Mario Bulzoni Editore, Roma: 1989, p.39.

As Micheli has indicated, the film is based primarily on four Pirandello short stories. These are linked together by the prologue, based upon a few short lines from *Il corvo di Mizzaro*:

> Pastori sfaccendati, arrampiccandosi un giorno sú per le balze di Mizzaro, sorpresero nel nido un grosso corvo, che se ne stava pacificamente a covar le uova. (...) Quei pastori si spassarono a tormentarlo un'intera giornata; poi uno di loro (...) gli legò una campanellina di bronzo al collo e lo rimise in libertà: --Godi![9]

The visual counterpart of these brief phrases becomes a sort of preamble after which the plot of the first short story, *L'altro figlio* begins to unfold. The crow, set free, begins to circle in the sky, flying over the burned Sicilian countryside, past lost and sunny towns, over the ruins of Greek temples; and as the camera follows its path, its presence is felt through the gentle tinkling of the little bell around its neck. The crow, thereby, first makes known the physical setting of the film, that is, where all the episodes take place; and it then serves also as a visual as well as an acoustic link between one episode and the next as its flight and its landing precede each short story. The epilogue to the film involves the author himself, Pirandello, who after the death of his mother, returns to his home, which is, of course, a part of the Sicilian landscape that is the setting for the entire film. His arrival is portrayed realistically, but it is soon clear that we are in that very Pirandellian place, the meeting ground of reality and illusion, of mind and "things" --as the author meets a character

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[9]Luigi Pirandello, "Il corvo di Mizzaro", in Novelle per un anno, Vol. 1, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore,Milano: 1956, p.1017.

from one of his short stories in the film. The epilogue includes very delicately placed hints of at least four other of his short stories (*Amicissimi, La camera in attesa, Lumie di Sicilia* and *Colloquii coi personaggi)* and its conclusion is stark, beautiful and very very Pirandellian. Within this structural framework, then, using the plots of the four short stories, the Tavianis attempt to portray, not so much the historical reality, the facticity of Sicily, as its character, its flavour, as seen through the eyes of Pirandello.[10]

This then, is the structure of the film, a structure which, because of its segmentary nature is ideally suited to classroom use. The film together with the short stories from which it is constructed form a unit of work which integrates all language skills into an interesting and thought-provoking whole which is innovative as well as effective in stimulating and facilitating real and natrual communication, both oral and written.

To illustrate the technique used, let us take just one of the episodes: *L'altro figlio.* The original short story is nineteen pages long. It is the story of an old woman, (and here I will continue with the description which Micheli gives):

> una povera madre creduta pazza a causa del suo strano isolamente, (che) introduce la vicenda intenta a *parlare* con i suoi due figli emigrati in America dei quali, da quando sono partiti, non ha avuto mai notizia. ...In effetti, detta una lettera ad una ragazza la quale, forse analfabeta anche

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[10]The author is grateful to Prof. Sergio Micheli for his ideas in this regard as expressed both in lectures on the cinema held at the Università per stranieri di Siena as well as in Pirandello in cinema--translation rights of which have been granted to this author.

> lei forse per burla, riempie il foglio di sgorbi. La storia poi si snoda intorno all'idea fissa di far arrivare questa lettera ai figli tramite un gruppo di emigranti in partenza; quindi sul suo passato, sul figlio più giovane che è lì e che lei non vuol riconoscere perche frutto di un atto di brutale violenza.[11]

Apart from some new vocabulary words, the short story is not too complex for students at the upper-intermediate (year 11/12) or advanced (university) level. In fact, it is easy enough to establish exactly what happens, how and where. Having done a sort of an outline of the plot of the short story and of the descriptions of the characters, the students are capable of retelling the story in their own words. And it is at this point that the marvellous advantage of film becomes apparent.

The students are divided into groups of three or four. Each group is given a section of the short story to transform into a screen play, that is, to reduce everything to dialogue and action in a set location. This means that first of all, the class as a whole must decide how to deal with the question of the changes of time and place, that is, when and where the dialogue and the actions will occur. Having done this, the groups can each work on their own section. For students of the television generation who see films regularly either in the cinema or at home on video, this activity tends to be approached with lively interest. They do not find it difficult to make the descriptions in the text visible and concrete and each student tries to convince the others of the validity of his own way of visualising things. The discussion, all

[11]Sergio Micheli, 1989, p. 42.

in Italian obviously, can even become acrimonious, but the instructor must avoid interfering in any way. It is up to the students to resolve these difficulties. The work of all the groups is then put together and the result is an actual --if rough-- screen play. A final refined version can be typed and time permitting, students can even video themselves acting it out.

It is only at this point that the film is screened. The students will have dealt with a number of problems in transforming the short story into a screen play. Now they will see how the two Tuscan directors resolved those problems. And whether they prefer the Tavianis' solutions or their own, they will have a great deal to say about it! Other topics for consideration and either discussion or written composition in regard to this first episode of the film include: How have the Tavianis solved the problem of the multiplicity of settings as well as that of time sequence in adapting the short story for the screen? Does the Tavianis' version of the short story reflect their particular interpretation of the Pirandellian vision of the world and what other interpretations could arise from the short story itself? What is the function of the sound backing to the film? Could the short story (or the episode from the film) have had any other conclusion? How are visual and/or sound effects used in the film to lead the spectator to the Tavianis' interpretation of Pirandello? What is, in fact, Pirandello and what is an invention of the Taviani brothers? Interesting topics regarding the film as a whole include such questions as: Why have the Tavianis chosen these particular short stories of Pirandello for their film? What techniques have they used to link

the four separate episodes together into a cohesive ensemble? What is the function of the prologue or the epilogue? Have these various linking or interpretive techniques functioned successfully.

It is obvious from the above considerations how rich the material is in terms of pedagogical opportunities for exercising all four macroskills. No need to worry here about achieving a balance between listening, speaking, reading and writing. They will all be balanced in a very natural way. And yet, this paper has only dealt with *L'altro figlio*. *Mal di luna* with its suspense mechanism and its very interesting synchronicity of score, story and image; the very unique Pirandellian humour evident in both *Mal di luna* as well as *La giara*; *Requiem* with its conflict with the powers that be; and the epilogue with its memory within memory all provide further, almost infinite, material for both oral and written communication within a classroom setting, communication which is thought-provoking, stimulating, and most of all natural.

Thus, as we have seen, all three of these techniques which make use of cinema in the classroom involve real communication. What about errors? It is always a problem, of course, to balance fluency versus accuracy of communication. Written work can be corrected by the instructor as usual, but what about aural/oral communication? As long as the class has been accustomed right from the beginning, gradually, over time to use only Italian, listening comprehension will not be a problem here, because if a student has not understood what her classmate is suggesting the group do, the classmate will let her know soon enough.

Correcting for accuracy in speaking requires more ingenuity on the part of the instructor. A variety of methods can be used. The instructor can make a list of words, expressions, grammatical inaccuracies which he has noted as he walks about the room, (without interrupting!) These can be given to the whole class or even to the individual group where they were observed. They can be supplemented if necessary by exercises for practice to be done outside class or in class after the film project has been completed. Similarly, a video or tape recording of individual groups can be made and corrected by the students themselves or the teacher if necessary, at the end of the project.

In conclusion I would like to reaffirm the premise which underpins all communicative language teaching strategies: only someone who has something to communicate will attempt to do so. In other words, real communication will take place only where there is something to communicate. For this reason, although literature and other written texts must not, of course, be ignored, and the teacher must not miss any occasion which they can offer to begin, encourage or cultivate real communication in Italian, cinema represents an extremely effective motivational technique which can help create the climate for meaningful communication.

ABSTRACT

CINEMA IN THE CLASSROOM:
Creating a Climate for Meaningful Communication

This paper restates the value of the communicative approach to language learning while highlighting some of the practical difficulties inherent in such an approach: time constraints, difficulty of providing motivation for communication in the more formal language registers, potential lack of balance between oral and written communication skills, the problem of finding a communication enhancing way of correcting inaccuracies, etc.

The use of cinema in the classroom is a technique which aids greatly in overcoming these difficulties. It can be used simply to provide an opportunity for enhancing listening skills and as a stimulus to discussion, or linked with a source literary text, it can be used very effectively to motivate students to communicate using all four macroskills. The latter technique involves using a literary text which lends itself to the visual medium --this is obviously the case since it has in fact been used as a source for a film!-- and inviting students to work together to achieve a "vision" of the text as a screen play which is then written and subsequently compared with that of the film-makers. The Taviani brothers' film *Káos* is used to illustrate the suggested strategy. Various techniques of dealing with lack of accuracy in communication are explored.

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